

<http://www.elandar.com/vieques/index.html#navy>

A SPECIAL REPORT: Vieques

The Navy, the Island and the Deal by Roger Trilling

Underwater Wasteland photos by Dr. James Porter, text by Julia Reynolds

A few years ago, the government of Puerto Rico wanted to find out what effect the U.S. Navy's presence had on the underwater environment around the island of Vieques. So they hired Dr. James Porter, a Yale-trained expert on coral reefs, to study the sea bed around Bahía Salina del Sur and Roca Alcatraz, just offshore from the Navy's airfield in Vieques.

Dr. Porter and his team of scientists from the University of Georgia were shocked by what they found.

The sea floor was littered with an array of Navy junk, some of it under just fifteen feet of water. The team found unexploded live ordnance, 2000-pound bombs, artillery shells, compressed-gas cylinders and bombs leaking toxic material onto the delicate coral reefs.

They also found a mysterious, sunken "barge of barrels." Dr. Porter says this broken-down, shipwrecked hull contains fifty-five gallon drums "too numerous to count," but he estimates there are at least 900 to 1,000 of them — contents unknown.

Read about Puerto Rico's alleged "gag order" on Dr. Porter and view never-before-published photos of the underwater wasteland, in El Andar Summer 2001.

The Navy, the Island and the Deal by Roger Trilling

Vieques is a little island off the eastern coast of Puerto Rico, the "Isla Nena" to the main island's "Isla Grande." By all accounts it is ravishingly beautiful.

There are palm trees, white sand beaches, stunning coral reefs, and three of the world's seven "bioluminescent" bays, lit up at night by tiny phosphorescent organisms.

And though it's only six miles from the Isla Grande, it has never been developed. No hotel chains, no fast food, no strip malls. In fact, most of it isn't even populated.

Why? Because for the past sixty years, Vieques has been a training-ground for the Atlantic Fleet. It's the Navy's only "combined-assault" live-fire target range, involving subs, boats, Marines and planes, in whole or parts. When the Navy's not using it, they rent it out to foreign navies.

The Vieques ranges are part of Roosevelt Roads, one of the largest Navy bases in the world, which is just across the bay on mainland Puerto Rico. And Vieques is its dumping ground, where it "cooks off" unwanted — and highly toxic — ammunition in open pits, exposed to land, sea, air, and the local residents.

Talk about heaven and hell in the same place.

To be continued...

Read about why the Navy isn't planning to leave Vieques by 2003.

Follow the behind-the scenes deal between Clinton, Puerto Rico's Governor Rosselló and the Navy, in El Andar Summer 2001.

© 2001 Roger Trilling, El Andar Magazine